The Simple Past vs. the Past Progressive

Simple Past

1. The simple past is normally used for describing the past such as in story telling.
   a. A quickly finished action or event in the past. [Something that started and ended quickly.]
      Tom broke his camera yesterday.
   b. A longer situation or action in the past. [The simple past suggests that it started and ended in the past.]
      She spent all summer in Canada last year.
2. A repeated event in the past.
   Regularly every summer, Janet fell in love.
3. Certain verbs cannot be progressive (nonprogressive verbs).
   They are not ‘action’ verbs, but ‘state / condition’ verbs.
   Tom had a big house before he came here. (*Tom was having a big house before he came here.)

Past Progressive

1. The past progressive is used for temporary actions and situations. The past progressive is NOT normally used for longer, more permanent, and repeated actions in the past.
   a. An activity in progress around a particular time. (Neither starting nor ending is mentioned.)
      What were you doing at 5 o’clock yesterday evening? I was studying in the library.
   b. Past progressive is used to stress that something that was in progress at every moment during a period of time in the past.
      I was practicing basketball all day last Saturday.
2. The past progressive is often used in narratives for dramatic effects.
3. The past progressive is often used with the simple past. In such a case, the past progressive is used for a long action that was interrupted by another short action. The simple past is used for the interrupting action.
   While I was shopping at the mall I saw Janet.
4. Was/were going to is used to talk about future plans that were made in the past (future in the past).
   I was going to visit my family last weekend, but I couldn’t. I was too busy studying.

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